Sex and gender distinction

The **distinction between sex and gender** differentiates a person's biological sex (the anatomy of an individual's reproductive system, and secondary sex characteristics) from that person's gender, which can refer to either social roles based on the sex of the person (gender role) or personal identification of one's own gender based on an internal awareness (gender identity).[1][2] In this model, the idea of a "biological gender" is an oxymoron: the biological aspects are not gender-related, and the gender-related aspects are not biological. In some circumstances, an individual's assigned sex and gender do not align, and the person may be transgender.[1] In other cases, an individual may have biological sex characteristics that complicate sex assignment, and the person may be intersex.

The sex and gender distinction is not universal. In ordinary speech, *sex* and *gender* are often used interchangeably.[3][4] Some dictionaries and academic disciplines give them different definitions while others do not. Some languages, such as German or Finnish, have no separate words for sex and gender, and the distinction has to be made through context. On occasion, using the English word *gender* is appropriate.[5][6]

Among scientists, the term *sex differences* (as compared to *gender differences*) is typically applied to sexually dimorphic traits that are hypothesized to be evolved consequences of sexual selection.[7][8]

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Sex

Anisogamy, or the size differences of gametes (sex cells), is the defining feature of the two sexes. By definition, males have small, mobile gametes (sperm); females have large and generally immobile gametes (ova or eggs).[9] In humans, typical male or female sexual differentiation includes the presence or absence of a Y chromosome, the type of gonads (ovary or testes), the balance of sex hormones (testosterone and estrogen), the internal reproductive anatomy (e.g. uterus or prostate gland), and the external genitalia (e.g. penis or vulva).[10] People with mixed sex factors are intersex. People whose internal psychological experience differs from their assigned sex are transgender, transsexual, or non-binary.

The consensus among scientists is that all behaviors are phenotypes—complex interactions of both biology and environment—and thus nature vs. nurture is a misleading categorization.[11][12] The term *sex differences* is typically applied to sexually dimorphic traits that are hypothesized to be evolved consequences of sexual selection. For example, the human "sex difference" in height is a

consequence of sexual selection, while the "gender difference" typically seen in head hair length (women with longer hair) is not.[7][8] Scientific research shows an individual's sex influences his or her behavior.[13][14][15][16][17]

Sex is annotated as different from *gender* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, where it says *sex* "tends now to refer to biological differences".[18] The World Health Organization (WHO) similarly states that "'sex' refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women" and that "'male' and 'female' are sex categories".[19]

The *American Heritage Dictionary* (5th ed.), however, lists *sex* as both "Either of the two divisions, designated female and male, by which most organisms are classified on the basis of their reproductive organs and functions" and "One's identity as either female or male," among other definitions.[20]

History

Historian Thomas W. Laqueur suggests that from the Renaissance to the 18th century, there was a prevailing inclination among doctors towards the existence of only one biological sex (the one-sex theory, that women and men had the same fundamental reproductive structure).[21] In some discourses, this view persisted into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[22][23] Laqueur asserts that even at its peak, the one-sex model was supported among highly educated Europeans but is not known to have been a popular view nor one entirely agreed upon by doctors who treated the general population.[24] Sex and gender took center stage in America in the time of wars, when women had to work and men were at war.[25]

Gender

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *gender* is defined as, "[i]n mod[ern] (esp[ecially] feminist) use, a euphemism for the sex of a human being, often intended to emphasize the social and cultural, as opposed to the biological, distinctions between the sexes.", with the earliest example cited being from 1963.[26] The *American Heritage Dictionary* (5th edition), in addition to defining gender the same way that it defines biological sex, also states that *gender* may be defined by identity as "neither entirely female nor entirely male"; its *Usage Note* adds:

> Some people maintain that the word *sex* should be reserved for reference to the biological aspects of being male or female or to sexual activity, and that the word *gender* should be used only to refer to sociocultural roles. ... In some situations this distinction avoids ambiguity as in *gender research*, which is clear in a way that *sex research* is not. The distinction can be problematic, however. Linguistically, there isn't any real difference between *gender bias* and *sex bias*, and it may seem contrived to insist that *sex* is incorrect in this instance.[20]

A working definition in use by the World Health Organization for its work is that "'[g]ender' refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women" and that "'masculine' and 'feminine' are gender categories."[19] The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) used to use *gender* instead of *sex* when referring to physiological differences between male and female organisms.[27] In 2011, they reversed their position on this and began using *sex* as the biological classification and *gender* as "a person's self representation as male or female, or how that person is responded to by social institutions based on the individual's gender presentation."[28] *Gender* is also now commonly used even to refer to the physiology of non-human animals, without any implication of social gender roles.[4]

GLAAD (formerly the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) makes a distinction between sex and gender in their most recent Media Reference Guide: Sex is "the classification of people as male or female" at birth, based on bodily characteristics such as chromosomes, hormones, internal reproductive organs, and genitalia. Gender identity is "one's internal, personal sense of being a man or woman (or a boy or a girl)".[29]

Some feminist philosophers maintain that gender is totally undetermined by sex. See, for example, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, a widely influential feminist text.[30]

The case of David Reimer, who was, according to studies published by John Money, raised as a girl after a botched circumcision, was described in the book *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl.* Reimer was in fact not comfortable as a girl and later changed gender identity back to male when discovered the truth of his surgery. He eventually committed suicide.[31]

History

Gender in the sense of social and behavioral distinctions, according to archaeological evidence, arose "at least by some 30,000 years ago".[32] More evidence was found as of "26,000 years ago",[33] at least at the archeological site Dolní Věstonice I and others, in what is now the Czech Republic.[34] This is during the Upper Paleolithic time period.[35]

The historic meaning of *gender*, ultimately derived from Latin *genus*, was of "kind" or "variety". By the 20th century, this meaning was obsolete, and the only formal use of *gender* was in grammar.[3] This changed in the early 1970s when the work of John Money, particularly the popular college textbook *Man & Woman, Boy & Girl*, was embraced by feminist theory. This meaning of *gender* is now prevalent in the social sciences, although in many other contexts, *gender* includes *sex* or replaces it.[4] Gender was first only used in languages to describe the feminine and masculine words, up until around the 1960s.[36]

Distinction in linguistics

Since the social sciences now distinguish between biologically defined *sex* and socially constructed *gender*, the term *gender* is now also sometimes used by linguists to refer to social gender as well as grammatical gender. Traditionally, however, a distinction has been made by linguists between *sex* and *gender*, where *sex* refers primarily to the attributes of real-world entities – the relevant extralinguistic attributes being, for instance, male, female, non-personal, and indeterminate sex – and grammatical gender refers to a category, such as masculine, feminine, and neuter (often based on sex, but not exclusively so in all languages), that determines the agreement between nouns of different genders and associated words, such as articles and adjectives.[37][38]

A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language, for instance, states

> By GENDER is meant a grammatical classification of nouns, pronouns, or other words in the noun phrase according to certain meaning-related distinctions, especially a distinction related to the sex of the referent.[39]

Thus German, for instance, has three genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter. Nouns referring to people and animals of known sex are *generally* referred to by nouns with the equivalent gender. Thus *Mann* (meaning man) is masculine and is associated with a masculine definite article to give *der Mann*, while *Frau* (meaning woman) is feminine and is associated with a feminine definite article to give *die Frau*. However the words for inanimate objects are commonly masculine (e.g. *der Tisch*, the table) or feminine (*die Armbanduhr*, the watch), and grammatical gender can diverge from biological sex; for instance the feminine noun *[die] Person* refers to a person of either sex, and the neuter noun *[das] Mädchen* means "the girl".

In modern English, there is no true grammatical gender in this sense,[37] though the differentiation, for instance, between the pronouns "he" and "she", which in English refers to a difference in sex (or social gender), is sometimes referred to as a gender distinction. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, for instance, refers to the semantically based "covert" gender (e.g. male and female, not masculine and feminine) of English nouns, as opposed to the "overt" gender of some English pronouns; this yields *nine* gender classes: male, female, dual, common, collective, higher male animal, higher female animal, lower animal, and inanimate, and these semantic gender classes affect the possible choices of pronoun for coreference to the real-life entity, e.g. *who* and *he* for *brother* but *which* and *it* or *she* for *cow*.[39]

West and Zimmerman's "Doing gender"

Used primarily in sociology and gender studies, "*doing gender*" is the socially constructed performance which takes place during routine human interactions, rather than as a set of essentialized qualities based on one's biological sex.[40] The term first appeared in Candace West and Don Zimmerman's article "Doing Gender", published in the peer-reviewed journal, *Gender and Society*.[41]

Originally written in 1977 but not published until 1987,[42] *Doing Gender* is the most cited article published in *Gender and Society*.[41]

West and Zimmerman state that to understand gender as activity, it is important to differentiate between sex, sex category, and gender.[40]:127 They say that sex refers to the socially agreed upon specifications that establish one as male or female; sex is most often based on an individual's genitalia, or even their chromosomal typing before birth.[40] They consider sex categories to be dichotomous, and that the person is placed in a sex category by exhibiting qualities exclusive to one category or the other. During most interactions, others situate a person's sex by identifying their sex category; however, they believe that a person's sex need not align with their sex category.[40] West and Zimmerman maintain that the sex category is "established and sustained by the socially required identificatory displays that proclaim one's membership in one or the other category".[40]:127 Gender is the performance of attitudes and actions that are considered socially acceptable for one's sex category.[40]:127

West and Zimmerman suggested that the interactional process of *doing gender*, combined with socially agreed upon gender expectations, holds individuals accountable for their gender performances.[40] They also believe that while "doing gender" appropriately strengthens and promotes social structures based on the gender dichotomy, it inappropriately does not call into question these same social structures; only the individual actor is questioned.[40] The concept of "doing gender" recognizes that gender both structures human interactions and is created through them.[40]

Criticism of the "sex difference" versus "gender difference" distinction

The current distinction between the terms *sex difference* versus *gender difference* has been criticized as misleading and counterproductive. These terms suggest that the behavior *of an individual* can be partitioned into separate biological and cultural factors. (However, behavioral differences between individuals can be statistically partitioned, as studied by behavioral genetics.) Instead, all behaviors are phenotypes—a complex interweaving of both nature and nurture.[43]

Diane Halpern, in her book *Sex Differences in Cognitive Abilities*, argued problems with *sex* vs. *gender* terminology: "I cannot argue (in this book) that nature and nurture are inseparable and then... use different terms to refer to each class of variables. The ...biological manifestations of sex are confounded with psychosocial variables.... The use of different terms to label these two types of contributions to human existence seemed inappropriate in light of the biopsychosocial position I have taken." She quotes Steven Pinker's summary of the problems with the terms sex and gender: "Part of it is a new prissiness -- many people today are as squeamish about sexual dimorphism as the Victorians were about sex. But part of it is a limitation of the English language. The word 'sex' refers ambiguously to copulation and to sexual dimorphism..."[44] Richard Lippa writes in *Gender, Nature and Nurture* that "Some researchers have argued that the word *sex* should be used to refer to (biological differences), whereas the word *gender* should be used to refer to (cultural differences). However, it is not at all clear the degree to which the differences between males and females are due to biological factors versus learned and cultural factors. Furthermore, indiscriminate use of the word *gender* tends to obscure the distinction between two different topics: (a) differences between males and females, and (b) individual differences in maleness and femaleness that occur within each sex."[45]

It has been suggested that more useful distinctions to make would be whether a behavioral difference between the sexes is first due to an evolved adaptation, then, if so, whether the adaptation is sexually dimorphic (different) or sexually monomorphic (the same in both sexes). The term *sex difference* could then be re-defined as between-sex differences that are manifestations of a sexually dimorphic adaptation (which is how many scientists use the term),[46][47] while the term *gender difference* could be re-defined as due to differential socialization between the sexes of a monomorphic adaptation or byproduct. For example, greater male propensity toward physical aggression and risk taking would be termed a "sex difference;" the generally longer head hair length of females would be termed a "gender diference."[48]

Transgender and genderqueer

Transgender people experience a mismatch between their gender identity or gender expression, and their assigned sex.[49][50][51] Transgender people are sometimes called *transsexual* if they desire medical assistance to transition from one sex to another

Transgender is also an umbrella term: in addition to including people whose gender identity is the *opposite* of their assigned sex (trans men and trans women), it may include people who are not exclusively masculine or feminine (e.g. people who are genderqueer, non-binary, bigender, pangender, genderfluid, or agender).[50][52][53] Other definitions of *transgender* also include people who belong to a third gender, or conceptualize transgender people as a third gender.[54][55] Infrequently, the term *transgender* is defined very broadly to include cross-dressers.[56]

Feminism

General

Many feminists consider sex to only be a matter of biology and something that is not about social or cultural construction. For example, Lynda Birke, a feminist biologist, states that "'biology' is not seen as something which might change."[57] However, the sex/gender distinction, also known as the Standard Model of Sex/Gender, is criticized by feminists who believe that there is undue emphasis placed on sex being a biological aspect, something that is fixed, natural, unchanging, and consisting of a male/female dichotomy. They believe the distinction fails to recognize anything outside the strictly male/female dichotomy and that it creates a barrier between those that fit as 'usual' and those that are 'unusual'. In order to prove that sex is not only limited to two categories Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Sexing the Body* addresses the birth of children who are intersex. In this case, the standard model (sex/gender distinction) is seen as incorrect with regard to its notion that there are only two sexes, male and female. This is because "complete maleness and complete femaleness represent the extreme ends of a spectrum of possible body types."[58] In other words, Fausto-Sterling argues that there are multitudes of sexes in between the two extremes of male and female.

Rather than viewing sex as a biological construct, there are feminists who accept both sex and gender as a social construct. According to the Intersex Society of North America, "nature doesn't decide where the category of 'male' ends and the category of 'intersex' begins, or where the category of 'intersex' ends and the category of 'female' begins. Humans decide. Humans (today, typically doctors) decide how small a penis has to be, or how unusual a combination of parts has to be, before it counts as intersex."[59] Fausto-Sterling believes that sex is socially constructed because nature does not decide on who is seen as a male or female physically. Rather, doctors decide what seems to be a "natural" sex for the inhabitants of society. In addition, the gender, behavior, actions, and appearance of males/females is also seen as socially constructed because codes of femininity and masculinity are chosen and deemed fit by society for societal usage.

Limitations

Some feminists go further and argue that neither sex nor gender are strictly binary concepts. Judith Lorber, for instance, has stated that many conventional indicators of sex are not sufficient to demarcate male from female. For example, not all women lactate, while some men do.[60] Similarly, Suzanne Kessler, in a 1990 survey of medical specialists in pediatric intersexuality, found out that when a child was born with XY chromosomes but ambiguous genitalia, its sex was often determined according to the size of its penis.[61] Thus, even if the sex/gender distinction holds, Lorber and Kessler suggest that the dichotomies of female/male and masculine/feminine are not themselves exhaustive. Lorber writes, "My perspective goes beyond accepted feminist views that gender is a cultural overlay that modifies physiological sex differences [...] I am arguing that bodies differ in many ways physiologically, but they are completely transformed by social practices to fit into the salient categories of a society, the most pervasive of which are 'female' and 'male' and 'women' and 'men.'"[60]

Moreover, Lorber has alleged that there exists more diversity within the individual categories of sex and gender—female/male and feminine/masculine, respectively—than between them.[60] Hence, her fundamental claim is that both sex and gender are social constructions, rather than natural kinds.

A comparable view has been advanced by Linda Zerilli, who writes regarding Monique Wittig, that she is "critical of the sex/gender dichotomy in much feminist theory because such a dichotomy leaves unquestioned the belief that there is a 'core of nature which resists examination, a relationship excluded from the social in the analysis—a relationship whose characteristic is ineluctability in culture, as well as in nature, and which is the heterosexual relationship."[62] Judith Butler also criticizes the sex/gender distinction.

Discussing sex as biological fact causes sex to appear natural and politically neutral. However, she argues that "the ostensibly natural facts of sex [are] discursively produced in the service of other political and social interests." Butler concludes, "If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all."[63]

See also

- Gender equality
- Gender polarization
- Sex differences in psychology
- Stereotyping

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